

Frederick Melo, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*

A St. Paul resident becomes reacquainted with Jimmy Carter - and he spruces up her home  
Dannie Mae McKibbins isn't your typical Habitat for Humanity recipient.

McKibbins, the first black woman to enroll in the University of Minnesota's nursing program, had a career as a surgical nurse before retiring decades ago. A frugal woman, she's saved every dime she could. "I've always owned my own home."

At the age of 80, however, she isn't quite able to stay on top of all the upkeep a house demands. The shrubs grew up past the windows of her home on St. Paul's East Side, and its once-vibrant exterior faded.

So in stepped Twin Cities Habitat for Humanity's "Brush with Kindness" program along with a crew of volunteers. On Thursday, McKibbins' Desoto Street home got a fresh coat of turquoise-green paint, courtesy of Habitat's most famous volunteer - former President Jimmy Carter - as well as former Vice President Walter Mondale, St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman and U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum.

"I take credit for the whole front of the house," said Coleman, after spending the morning with a paint roller. "I primed it. ... Well, I had a little help."

Another Habitat volunteer, 5th Ward city council member Lee Helgen, said the improvement was striking and the work, like Carter's two-day visit to the Twin Cities, had inspired residents up and down the block to spruce up their own homes.

"When you looked at this house before, it was all overgrown," Helgen said. "The neighbors across the street have already painted their garage. ... It's really a low-cost, high-impact (investment) that creates a visible change."

Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, arrived in the Twin Cities on Wednesday to take part in Habitat's five-day homebuilding effort, which targeted one St. Paul and one Minneapolis neighborhood hit hardest by the foreclosure crisis. The Carters are to spend today in Birmingham, Ala.

Organizers said the Brush with Kindness program focuses on helping elderly and disabled homeowners fix gutters, add wheelchair ramps and prime, paint and complete other basic exterior home repairs, a bit of a departure from the homebuilding work that has made the faith-based nonprofit famous worldwide.

Enrollees have been "having to make choices between taking care of the outside of their house and prescription drugs," said Habitat spokeswoman Kristin Beckmann.

As a result of the effort, existing homes stay up to code and the neighborhood remains an attractive investment for new homeowners. McCollum noted that the program helps many folks who might otherwise consider moving into public housing, a loss for the community and a burden for the individual and taxpayers.

"If people stay in their homes, it's good for neighborhoods, it's good for individuals, and it's better for Dannie," McCollum said.

Beckmann said Brush with Kindness manager Pat Lund came up with the idea 10 years ago, and it has since become a model for Habitat chapters across the country. The Minneapolis-based Valspar Corp. has donated more than 1 million cans of paint to the effort.

"We just did our 1,000th (project) this past summer," Beckmann said. "We do about 100 per year. We're going to try to get up to 120 per year."

Habitat, which builds housing for low-income home buyers and outfits them with zero-interest mortgages, is one of the nation's 10 largest homebuilders. About 80 percent of its construction occurs outside the United States, much of it in the developing world, Carter said.

In the U.S., projects are just as likely to focus on top-to-bottom rehabs of existing houses that have fallen into disrepair.

"I think in this country, more than any other time in the past 27 years, there's been a need for rehabilitation ... rather than new construction," Carter said in a meeting with reporters shortly before lunch.

"You have one or two or three houses on the block that have been owned previously by people with a mortgage ... and they just abandon it," Carter said. "This creates a blight on the community. ... If you've got an empty house next door, why should you spend money on your own home?"

He said the Obama administration and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development have responded by providing cities with millions of dollars in neighborhood stabilization funds. The money has helped municipalities and nonprofit developers such as Habitat acquire and redevelop vacant homes.

"This is the first time since I was in office that the federal government has contributed substantially to the rehabilitation of houses," Carter said.

McKibbins was honored to be reunited with Carter, who spoke to her class at the University of Minnesota decades ago. When he learned back then that she had grown up near the same part of Georgia where he'd been living, he invited her to coffee.

"He remembered me," McKibbins said Thursday, cradling the Bible that Carter gave her as a present and still relishing his kiss on her cheek. "I think it's going to be the prettiest house on the block."

## RESOURCES

St. Paul makes low-interest home-improvement loans available to mostly low-income residents through the St. Paul Home Loan Fund. For more information, call 651-266-6712. The following nonprofits and neighborhood organizations also help low- and moderate-income families with home-improvements:

# Housing Resource Center: 651-228-1077

# Dayton's Bluff Housing: 651-774-6995

# Community Neighborhood Housing Services: 651-292-8710

# Greater Frogtown CDC: 651-789-7485

# North East Neighborhood Development Corp.: 651-774-6995

# NEDA-Westside: 651-292-0817

# SPARK-North End, Hamline Midway: 651-488-1039

# Minnesota Housing Fix Up Funds: 651-296-8215

# A Brush with Kindness: 612-788-8169

# Handyworks: 612-721-8687

# Hearts and Hammers: 612-758-4558

# Rebuilding Together: 651-776-4273

# Metro-paint-a-thon: 612-721-8687, ext. 321

# Environment and Energy Resource Center: 651-227-7847

# Eureka Recycling: 651-222-7678

# First Call for Help: 211